

# Admitting defeat: why I am quitting nature conservation



**Disclaimer:** while this piece refers to various conservation organisations and structures, I apologise in advance to my many friends and colleagues over the years who have worked hard within impossible structures to do their best. This rant is not aimed at you and especially not to those who are hanging on in there fighting away. I salute you all!

## Losing battles

My entire life has been one of failure. I have been involved in conservation all my life. Starting as a birdwatcher I quickly realised the plight of much of

Nature and joined various conservation organisations. I went on my first protest march aged 12, and have been in many direct actions and was arrested before it was fashionable. I have also been an active fieldworker and monitored the decline of many species, with no action being taken on my reports and papers. But one only has to look at the multitude of reports showing how we are losing Nature to the edge of extinction across the planet to realise my work has contributed zilch. So now I've had enough. I am suffering from ecological grief. As Aldo Leopold says, as I have an ecological education I am "living alone in a damaged world".

## **A cliff edge life**

In my 40 years as a professional conservationist I have worked as a scientist surveying Nature and helping catalogue the disastrous declines in species and habitats as well as working on policy trying to turn around government inaction. None of this has worked. Despite increased knowledge of the plight of Nature and much better legislation nothing has changed. Survey results are ignored, legislation is not implemented. It has been a bit like my hobby of mountaineering – you think you are approaching the summit but there is always another cliff to conquer in front of you.

During my time nature conservation and environmental organisations have grown enormously. The Wales office of RSPB had around 5 staff when I first worked for them. They now have two offices in Wales (not counting reserves) with dozens of staff and I do not think they are achieving any more. I'm not picking them out in particular (when did you last hear much from Greenpeace or Friend of the Earth) but as all organisations have grown they have become far more corporate and therefore increasingly inflexible. Rather than being light-footed, prioritising and improvising, typical excuses for inaction are 'No – we can't do that, it's not in the work plan' or 'I'll have to take this to Senior management'. Everything now requires huge proposals or policy statements which are passed round and endlessly edited meaning we are all drowning in email and agonising about text, not about what occurs on the ground. I think supporters of most large conservation organisations should ask for their

money back as these bodies are not delivering the product they are selling.



Photo: Mick Green

## **A world of professional word dust**

As 'conservation' became mainstream we have been drawn into the system. We are now regularly consulted on policy from government but our responses are never listened to – they just tie up vast amounts of staff time on all sides that could actually go out and achieve something if they were allowed. The 'conservation' organisations are almost as bad with internal consultations and vast amounts of documents tying up in-boxes and time through groups such as the Wildlife Links. Government documents are increasingly overlong and full of complete tosh and indulge so much staff time they lead to death by consultation (which they are probably designed to do) . Many of these are increasingly written by people with no field experience of what Nature actually looks like or how ecosystems might work. Over the years I have responded to hundreds of government consultations. At the end

of the day the policy emerges almost completely unchanged – no responses from myself or my colleagues in other organisations are given any weight. I'm still waiting for the day when I get a response that says "You were right Mick – we hadn't thought of that so will rip up the policy and start again" – it just doesn't happen. Consultations are a sham that just clog the system and the workforce. We should ignore them, be realistic and demand the impossible every time!

Conservation organisations should give up wasting time on responding to such consultations (which are full of weasel words) and instead work on insisting on implementation of existing legislation (which various reviews have shown is not that bad!) I have been involved with taking several successful complaints to Europe forcing government to take their legal duties seriously. Small groups like Client Earth and the even smaller Natural Justice have achieved more in their relatively short lives than the bloated corporate groups. Sod wasting time on a meaningless consultation. Take the buggers to Court and force them to apply their own laws.

## **Time to revolt in numbers?**

Why do the Conservation giants not flex their muscles? Collectively they have far more members than all the political parties put together and represent a far wider proportion of society than the landowning and farming lobbies. Yet the latter seem to hold sway in any policy implementation with the conservation bodies seemingly happy to go along with feeble 'agri-environment' schemes (where the emphasis is always on the 'Agri') rather than get their members out on the streets calling for a halt to the continuing destruction of our ecosystems. Why doesn't the RSPB or National Trust use their membership more to demand actual action from our politicians? To me they seem to feed their members saccharine drivel in their magazines rather than having the call to arms that should be there. We have the largest NGOs in Europe but have suffered the largest losses of Nature across the continent.

## **Muddling through with bureaucrats**

As the extinction crisis escalates most funding for monitoring has been lost. This means that we are making decisions on priorities in the dark. I recently was involved with a meeting with Natural Resources Wales (NRW), discussing its forthcoming *State of Natural Resources Report* which it is legally obliged to produce. I asked how it was going to be able to produce such a report given that the agency had pulled nearly all the funding from monitoring projects. The reply was that it will have to rely on the 'best available evidence' – i.e. make a guess. This is totally unacceptable but indicative of the new 'conservation' regime that is led by bureaucrats not ecologists.

## **Outdated and failing conservation measures?**

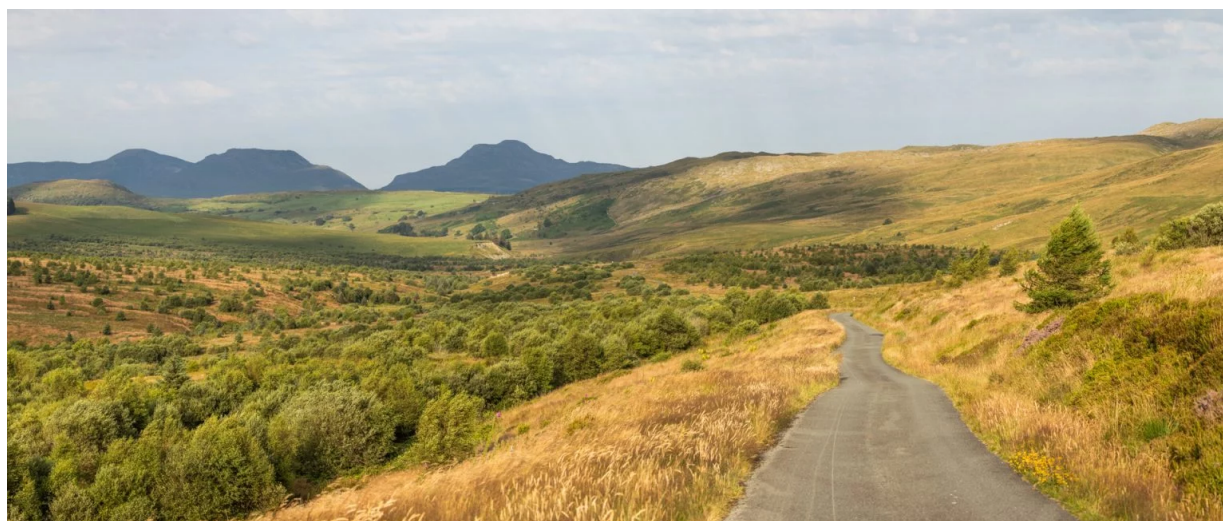
There is also a complete lack of ambition in 'conservation'. We suffer from the shifting baseline syndrome and are only looking to freeze things as they are now, not restore Nature to any higher levels. Research on Skomer Island, off the Pembrokeshire Coast, has shown that since 1972 the population on Guillemots has increased from 2000 to 25000. Job done, so that NRW pulled the funding for monitoring. However, the scientist involved, who had been working there since 1972, showed that in the 1930s the population was around 100,000 so we are only a quarter of the way to recovery, yet NRW seems to think this is sufficient and there is no need for any ambition to continue the recovery or the monitoring to inform this.

I've recently been invited to be involved in a review of Special Protection Areas in Wales to see if they are sufficient to protect a very limited range of birds. Given that there is widespread evidence that such designations do not bestow protection what is the point? Protected areas work takes up lots of staff time and are so restricted to 'features' (individual species and habitats) that they are not ecologically sound. We are still tied up with a fixation on 'protected areas' – SSSIs were originally designed to protect the best bits within a wider countryside that was still reasonably rich in Nature. Since then they have become islands in deserts. They have not been fit for purpose for a long time and as John Lawton said in his seminal report *Making Space for Nature* in 2010 they need to be More, Bigger Better and Joined up.

This has not happened.

## Break free to rewilding

Rewilding to my mind is the way forward – the full ecological restoration of large areas to functioning ecosystems. The concept is mired in difficulties of definition, and outright hostility from farming organisations but I personally think this wilder, more holistic approach, is the only way we can start to restore our critically diminished Nature. However, it seems impossible to get the large ‘conservation’ corporations to buy into some sort of agreement to pursue this at a wide scale, and they are still too wedded to management plans and control of their land to think about letting go and let Nature decide the future.



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## New radicalism

Perhaps there are some glimmers of hope on the horizon. Rewilding is firmly established on the agenda and is being promoted for many reasons, including as a tool in flood control and carbon sequestration as well as restoring Nature. Some schemes, such as the ‘Cairngorms Connect’ project are looking hopeful, and involve the large ‘Conservation’ bodies including government bodies. I have found there is a new breed of naturalists coming through. After skipping a generation or two I have found that there are many good young naturalists

re-finding old skills we once took for granted in Conservation. Meanwhile the direct action impact of Extinction Rebellion (XR) certainly had an effect in Wales last year – the Cardigan Bay Special Area of Conservation was threatened with a seismic survey, but this was quickly abandoned after MPs and Welsh Assembly Members were influenced by the presence of XR. However, I am not convinced we are moving quick enough to stop continuing losses of species and habitats across the UK.

## **My new choices – the right bodies and the right battles**

Despite the title of this piece I can't quit trying to stop the catastrophic loss of Nature. I'm just leaving 'conservation' and all the baggage it brings with it. I will continue to work with smaller organisations that are less bureaucratic, such as Whale and Dolphin Conservation, that I'm involved with, and in campaigning directly as an individual. I will continue to support people like Wild Justice and Client Earth to make sure we hold the Government to account. I will not be engaging in traditional 'conservation' such as responding to worthless government consultations or looking at prescriptive management of our environment, focussing on a small range of species and habitats that have no scientific or ecological justification to be divorced from the rest of Nature. I will continue to promote the Rewilding agenda.

I've spent 40 years banging my head against hard walls – it is going to be nice to stop, or at least introduce a bit of padding!

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## 4 THOUGHTS ON "ADMITTING DEFEAT: WHY I AM QUITTING NATURE CONSERVATION"



**Paul M**says:

There's not much I'd argue with there Mick

14TH APRIL 2020 AT 3:03 PM

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**Lisa S** says:

What a great shame, and what a terrible disservice Mick is doing to the organizations in the NGO sector who are working hard and – dare I say it – creating hectares and hectares of new habitat against very great odds from increasingly industrialized agriculture? lobbying for legislative change? achieving wholesale wildlife transformation of entire estates? I speak as a member of staff of one of them, who is very proud of our work.

Over-generalisation can be extremely damaging, especially when there is no invitation from this journal to counter it with other perspectives and other writers on the same topic. Sure, organizations aren't perfect. Point out problems and things that need to be changed, and let's work hard towards those changes to improve our effectiveness. But portraying the whole sector as something doomed to failure is something very different.

Is there any merit, or any usefulness, in surrendering to the 'NGO-bashing' culture that has been encouraged by certain political parties and those who have allowed themselves to become bitter and cynical over the huge challenges nature continues to face? I really don't think so. Instead of supporting those who are working against the odds within an increasingly challenged and underfunded sector, this kind of writing is choosing to add to the destruction.

16TH APRIL 2020 AT 8:58 AM

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**RosieWood** says:

Hi Mick, I sympathise. In opposition prior to 1997, Labour had to rely heavily on NGOs. Once in Govt., Labour engaged v positively with NGOs. After a while, some mistook this novel access for influence.

Some started to recruit staff indistinguishable from their civil service counterparts and in some cases this shift left some NGOs losing their bite and getting rid of their so called attack dogs.

With statutory bodies now emasculated and some NGOs lacking a hard edge, it's been down to new emerging, younger, more assertive groups to fill the void. I wonder if NGOs of my youth just need to rediscover their teeth and passion – maybe my age group contributed to the loss in the first place?

Having retired from the statutory sector (only so many times a girl can give Government advice it duly ignores or lies about after all) I feel liberated to be able to speak my mind – maybe you can too?

Maybe we help restore the balance in civil society? Able to articulate difficult messages others feel too constrained to? I remember hearing my NE CEO make a speech including the words 'rape and pillage' to describe the actions of the fishing industry. She was right. But she was wrong to say that in public from a public platform – that should have been the role of the NGOs ... who said not a word. Had they railed as they might have done in the 70's when I started, she could have been diplomatic in public knowing the industry and Government had heard the unvarnished truth already. They'd know it was better to accede to her (our) very reasonable requests than continue with business as usual and risk the very public wrath of the NGO sector willing to say in public what the statutory advisers never could. As it was, it was the NGO sector who joined the industry in its criticism of NE.

We can be willing to say that, for example, after decades of round table polite accommodating discussion, some sectors like grouse moor industry and elements in agriculture have had ample time to prove they're not in the slightest bit interested in protecting much less enhancing the environment. Not to undermine the efforts of those who have come after us, but to once more provide the unequivocal voice for Nature in public so our successors may be better heard in private?

Rejoice in no longer needing to toe the line Mick, revel in the freedom it gives you, and yes to rewilding at every scale, the bigger the better.

Maybe it's time we went back to leading the charge without fear or favour?

You haven't failed: you've helped build an enormous great platform on which your successors and theirs can and must build. It's someone else's turn to spend their working days digging their nails into their palms, grinding their teeth, banging their heads on walls, and leaving departmental meetings in Nobel House and shouting "for the love of God why are they so slow??"

26TH APRIL 2020 AT 10:58 PM

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**Barry Larking** says:

I sympathise Mick. My own vanishingly brief employment in conservation showed me quite enough of the deadweight of bureaucracy – not that it impinged much on what I was involved in, a desk job gazing down on Scotland from around 10,000 feet. Then and later I saw that the question of habitat protection went beyond any conservation organisations reach. I could also see straight forward politics for what they are: As Stalin said ‘How many divisions does the Pope have?’ Idealists don’t understand the nature of power.

Actually, the answer to that cynical comment isn’t quite so clear cut. Your observations about large charities is astute. All I know of today serve the interests of their management. I saw first hand how one such backed away from intervening in even the tiniest part of controversy; others are packed with establishment figures who would rather not get involved with that sort of thing, thank you. Sell you a T-shirt, yes. Get a flash mob together for a rumble? Hardly. You can have nature conservation, just not conserve nature.

It is worth noting that in our bureaucracy led world I am surrounded now by a number of clearly disillusioned; men – always men strangely – deeply disaffected from the careers that have ended in defeat like yours. It’s never a good idea to work in an area of policy or study you believe in from what I have seen – and experienced. The bast\*rds always grind you down.

Official nature conservation I ignore. The ‘art world’ I despise. No, make that loath. Yet still, I hear the Sky Larks singing high up over the Town Moor and find obscure artists online whose lives were passed not in the vicious celebrity ‘culture’ nonsense but devotion to this thing we are drawn towards something greater than ourselves that lends life it’s meaning and significance and always will.

30TH APRIL 2020 AT 2:14 PM

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